

StillBreathing

REVIEW

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STILL BREATHING (Romantic comedy, color, no rating, 1:49)

BY JOE LEYDON

AUSTIN, Texas (Variety) - First-time feature filmmaker James F. Robinson strikes just the right note of romantic whimsy in "Still Breathing," a light and bright romantic comedy about an ingenuous young Texan's attempts to woo a beautiful con woman who is, quite literally, the woman of his dreams.

Appealing performances by Brendan Fraser and Joanna Going add to the fun in a pic that, with clever marketing, could score respectable B.O. [box office returns] before finding an even bigger audience on cable and cassette.

Fraser is well cast as Fletcher, a dreamy-eyed eccentric who lives in San Antonio and works, sporadically, as a puppeteer and street performer. As pic begins, Fletcher is haunted by visions of a beautiful woman he's never met. For most folks, this might be frightening. But Fletcher accepts it as his fate as a McBracken: for generations, each male member of the family has dreamed of his eventual wife long before making her acquaintance.

In one especially disturbing vision, however, Fletcher sees his "dream girl" brutally dealing with a would-be mugger. (The capper to this brief sequence is a genuine hoot.) Turns out that, in the real world, Rosalyn (Going), the object of Fletcher's unconscious affections, is a cynical L.A. con artist who makes a reasonably prosperous living by bilking would-be suitors in an art scam.

Early in "Still Breathing," Rosalyn convinces a wealthy Argentine (Paolo Seganti) to pay a ridiculously inflated price for a painting she admires. (The art gallery owner is part of the sting.) Afterward, she rids herself of the smitten fellow by planting evidence to suggest she has AIDS.

The latter development might have come across as unacceptably crude if Going weren't able to convey a hint of long-dormant vulnerability in Rosalyn. In conversations with her mentor, Elaine (Ann Magnuson), Rosalyn admits that she is reaching the point of total burnout as an amoral manipulator. Even so, she's willing to try yet another sting, and Elaine promises to set her up with a "rich Texan."

Meanwhile, back in San Antonio, Fletcher has another dream, one that tells him he will find the love of his life in Formosa. So he drops everything and books a flight to China. During an L.A. stopover, however, he learns about a trendy bar named Formosa, and decides to check out the place. Naturally, that's where he sees Rosalyn, who's waiting for her latest mark. One thing leads to another, thanks to misinterpreted signals and mistaken assumptions, and complications ensue.

Much to her surprise and discomfort, Rosalyn finds herself growing genuinely fond of Fletcher. She even agrees to return with him to San Antonio, where he introduces her to his beloved Aunt [sic] Ida (Celeste Holm) and his equally eccentric friends. The road to true love hits a speed bump when Fletcher spills the beans about his visions, and Rosalyn learns he really isn't the millionaire she assumed. But this delays the happily-ever-after ending for only a few scenes.

Fraser is winning in a tricky role that calls for him to be at once engagingly innocent and nobody's fool. In one very funny scene, Fletcher listens with steadily mounting annoyance to an L.A. smoothie's condescending remarks about Texas. When he can take no more, he devastates the guy with some well-aimed put-downs that likely will elicit cheers and applause from many audiences. Going, too, has to strike a challenging balance in her performance, and she is every bit as successful. Early on, it's revealed that the seemingly hard-bitten Rosalyn has been distracted by her own golden-lit dreams. Going is extremely deft at revealing flashes of romantic yearning beneath her character's tough facade. Just as Fletcher brings out the best in Rosalyn, Going

and Fraser bring out the best in each other.

In addition to Holm and Magnuson, the fine supporting cast includes Angus MacFadyen as the art-gallery owner who gets his comeuppance from Fletcher, and Michael McKean as an arrogant businessman who brings out Rosalyn's predatory side. Lou Rawls gets prominent billing for playing the Tree Man, one of Fletcher's colorful San Antonio friends, but apparently much of his performance was left on the cutting-room floor.

Robinson allows his story to unfold at an aptly leisurely pace. But he is annoyingly fuzzy about a few key details. It's never entirely clear whether Fletcher is well-to-do or near-impooverished. He may be just a street performer -- and, occasionally, a collage artist -- but he seems to have more than enough money to maintain a large house and pay for impulsive trips to China. Even fairy tales should pay more attention to such details.

Attractively lensed on San Antonio and Los Angeles locations by John Thomas (Barcelona), "Still Breathing" sustains its warmly romantic tone with offhanded ease without ever turning silly or syrupy. The impressively eclectic musical score includes everything from operatic excerpts to Texas swing to "Harlem Nocturne." At one point, Holm plays the tuba with a small ensemble for a pleasingly jazzy version of Chopin's Berceuse. Like many other things in "Still Breathing," the number works much better than you would ever suspect.

Fletcher McBracken	Brendan Fraser
Rosalyn Willoughby	Joanna Going
Ida	Celeste Holm
Elaine	Ann Magnuson
The Tree Man	Lou Rawls
Philip	Angus MacFadyen
Cameron	Toby Huss
Tomas	Paolo Seganti
New Mark	Michael McKean

A ZapPictures production in association with Seattle Pacific Investments. Produced by James F. Robinson, Marshall

Persinger. Executive producer, Joyce Schweickert. Co-executive producer, Janet Graham.

Directed, written by James F. Robinson. Camera (Deluxe color), John Thomas; editor, Sean Albertson; music, Paul Mills; production design, Denise Pizzini; art direction, Bob West; costume design, Susanna Puisto; sound (Dolby), J. Byron Smith; assistant director, Maria L. Melograne; casting, Amy Lippens. Reviewed at South by Southwest Film Festival, March 15, 1997.

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